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Morpheme acquisition in EFL context: Third person singular agreement morpheme -s.

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Abstract

Learners of a second language have always been struggling to acquire the 3rd person agreement morpheme -s. The present study investigated the factors, whether over regularization or L1 interference, that EFL learners face while acquiring the of 3rd person agreement morpheme -s. The participants of the current study were 40 elementary level 7th graders students composed of 20 males and 20 females whose ages ranged from 12 to 14 and studying at a state school in İstanbul/Turkey. There were basically two instruments for this study which are written and oral outputs of the learners in the form of in-class and performance assignments. Activities have been prepared carefully to canalize the students to use all the personal pronouns. Oral part of the activities are recorded and each incidences of wrong use of 3rd person agreement morpheme -s counted; and same for writing. The results show that the errors made by students are mostly due to over regularization of the rule and L1 interference is not observed too much.

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1. Introduction

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) studies paid great attention to find any systematicity in morpheme acquisition (Mohammadkhani, Eslamdoost, & Gholamreza'i, 2011). For instance, Ellis (2008) examined the effect of L1 on L2 acquisition.

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In the literature it is clearly observed that for some (Dulay & Burt, 1974; Larsen-Freeman, 1976) no matter what your native language and background is, you will learn some particular morphemes in a fixed order. Within the scope of this paper, third person singular agreement morpheme -s is the least accurately used grammatical morpheme for L2 learners (Shin & Milroy, 1999).

The third person singular -s is one of the most difficult morphemes that the second language learners face while learning English. Despite this fact, learners have been continuing learning this morpheme in the very first phases of learning English no matter what their first language is. In the present study, however, we want to see the case of Turkish learners of English in the process of acquiring this specific morpheme while learning English as a foreign language. And we are going to try to explain some reasons behind the complexity of the morpheme that Turkish learners specifically experience while learning it. Seeing that, although there are many researches on the acquisition of this morpheme and ours is based on the Turkish learners of English, we can say that our research is distinguished in such a term. Also, there is some research in the literature on the complexities involved in acquisition of inflectional morphemes on the whole; however, the fact that ours' focus is only on the acquisition of this single morpheme differentiates the present research from others in the literature done previously.

2. Background

2.1. Morphosyntactic:

Chondrogianni & Marinis (2011) state in their article that in English, third person -s on lexical/thematic verb marks person and number, and gives rise to a morphophonologically poor agreement paradigm, as only third person singular -s is overtly marked as in the example below.

“Peter walks to school”

Nevertheless, they argue that Turkish is an agglutinating language with a rich morphological paradigm, and Turkish has different suffixes suggesting tense and agreement. Göksel & Kerslake (cited in Chondrogianni & Marinis, 2011) claim that Turkish has a quite transparent one-to-one form–meaning mapping, and Chondrogianni & Marinis (2011) suggest that there are six different forms in the verbal paradigm marking person, and first person singular is marked on present tense, as in example (1) and third person singular is in example (2) below.

(1) ist-iyor -um.

want-PROG -1SG

“I want”

(2) isti-yor

want-PROG-Ø 3SG

“S/he wants”

Furthermore, in the examples bellow, it is obviously seen that while Turkish has null morpheme to indicate third person singular, English has tense agreement morpheme -s to demonstrate third person singular.

Table 1. Turkish vs. English Morpheme Comparison

English	Turkish
I play + Ø	Ben oynar + im
You play + Ø	Sen oynar + sın
He/she/it play + s	O oynar + Ø

2.2. Acquisition

Acquisition studies showed that children learn some particular morphemes in a fixed order (Brown, 1973) and third person singular agreement morpheme -s got the highest rate in terms of difficulty of acquisition (O' Grady, Archibald, Aronoff, & Rees-Miller, 2009). And many assumptions were put forward that what may be the possible factors for L1 learners (Beyer & Kam, 2009).

There is scarcity of studies handling the ongoing discussion of what are the underlying reasons of having difficulty in third person singular agreement morpheme -s. Therefore, the present paper is aimed at investigating the problem to figure out the possible factors affecting the acquisition of third person singular agreement morpheme -s.

3. Methodology

The present paper is investigated through a written and oral output data analysis. The target group details are given below.

3.1. Research question

Does L1 (Turkish) affect L2 (English) third person agreement -s morpheme acquisition?

3.2. Participants

The participants were 40 students composed of 20 males and 20 females whose ages ranged from 12 to 14 and studying at a state school in Istanbul. The students were 7th graders who have been studying English for two and a half years in the form of two hours of instruction per week. They were living in the same district, and they all had similar social, educational and language backgrounds. The students have never been involved in any extracurricular English language program except the school. The level of the students was elementary in terms of proficiency in English so they studied third person singular before. The researcher was able to examine students course books to see what they have studied about third person singular agreement morpheme -s.

3.3. Data collection and instruments

In the study, the data was, first of all, oral output of the learners, which was obtained through a classroom activity and the second one was written output of them in the form of performance assignments. The researchers used both written and oral output together because it was not sufficient to analyze data obtained from just one of them in terms of acquisition. Harklau (2002) argues that using both written and oral output assumes very important role very early in the acquisition process.

3.4. Procedure

After the teacher finished presentation and practice sessions of the unit titled “Daily Habits” about simple present tense, she carried out an activity to be pedagogically useful. This activity is called “who does what?” (See Table 1) Through this activity, the students were provided with opportunities to produce the verbs on the activity chart with all the personal pronouns as well as the target form, which is 3rd person singular agreement -s. To make sure that all the pronouns are going to be used, the teacher wrote all the pronouns on the “who” column under the name column on the sheet. Also, in the “name” column, the students were required to write the name of the student/s in order to give the reporter student the chance to be able to use both/either the names of their friends and/or the personal pronouns.

Table 2. Daily Habits Activity

Who does what?

Physical/Everyday Activities	Name
1. Lift weights regularly
2. Go running everyday
3. Go bike riding
4. Play soccer everyday
5. Exercise at home
6. Do pushups everyday
7. Get enough sleep every night
8. Do aerobics
9. Study English everyday
10. Take a shower everyday

The students had the opportunity to use as many as “he” or “she” or the name of their friends with the verbs describing activities. In addition, they used personal pronoun “I” while reporting their choice.

Before the students shared their findings with the class, the classroom teacher had started high quality digital voice recorder to record students’ oral output.

In order to avoid possible complexities in the “who does what?” activity in the classroom, the teacher showed a recorded video of the activity. This was to make the students visualize the procedures to be followed during the activity and get involved more voluntarily.

After completing the session, the teacher asked the students to write daily routines of their family as homework together with their pets’ routines (if any). This was a written data showing the use of third person singular morpheme –s by the students. In addition to this, this writing was added to the data gotten from the in-class activity. Apart from these, with this homework, the teacher had the opportunity to see the case of third person singular morpheme –s with the pronoun “it” referring to the students’ pets. The homework was submitted to the teacher on a separate piece of paper.

4. Results and discussion

The research question of the present paper was “Does L1 (Turkish) affect L2 (English) third person agreement -s morpheme acquisition?”. Very simply we can make some inferences still some examples should be given.

After having conducted the research, incorrect use of 3rd person agreement -s is observed such as;

- “she get up at half past eight, she wash her face , she don’t go to school , she drink tea , she wear her clothes and she sleep.”
- “she gos to bed”
- “he does drive a car”
- “she does her homework and tidy her room”
- “he haves breakfast”

These errors are resulted due to overgeneralization or over regularization. For instance, students should normally use “has” instead of “have”. Since they remember the rule that is putting -s when the subject is “he”, they apply it. Also they omit the -s as in the first example to regulate the rule.

On the other hand, below sentences are not observed due to rare use of them;

- “I goes to school”
- “We plays football”

In brief, L1 interference is observed on acquisition of 3rd person singular agreement morpheme, and Turkish L2 learners of English are sensitive to the omission of third person agreement morpheme -s.

Students overgeneralize/overregulate the rule as in the example below;

Table 3. Over generalizing/overregulating

Errors due to Over Regularization	Errors due to L1 Interference
I go	I goes
You go	You goes
She go	She go

Seeing the above literature and the results of the study it is obvious that English morphemes are not acquired in a particular order and both, native or non-native learners of English, has difficulty in learning third person agreement morpheme -s. While native learner's reason is the complexity of the rules, for foreign/second language learners the case is due to systematicity of the brain. It means such learners are trying to apply one rule for all situations which leads them to fault. Still it is possible to observe some exemptions.

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